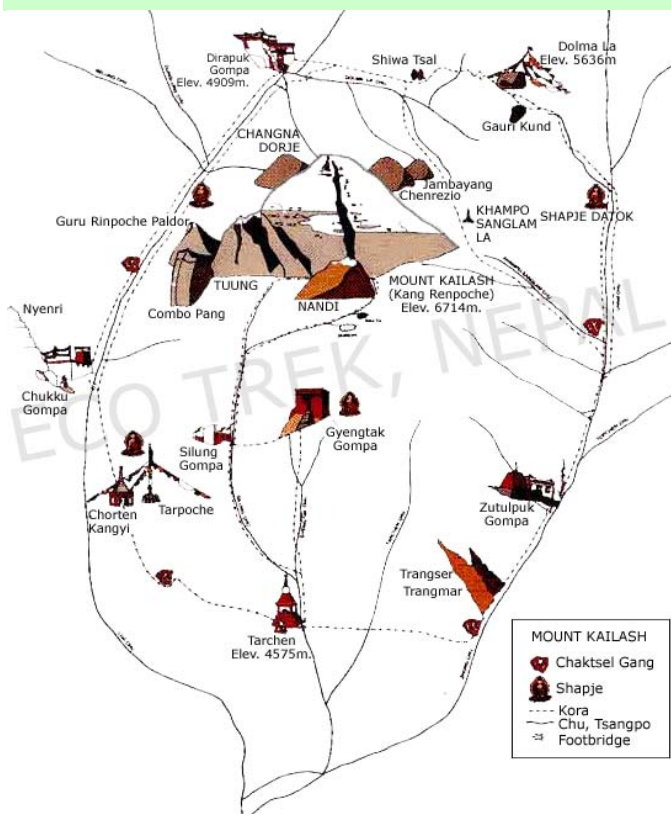


The Mystery of the Kailash Trail



Chapter 1

The pilgrims assemble

Bharat Bhushan

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Pre-publication draft manuscript

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About the book

The oldest mystery known to the Oriental World. It is said that nobody dares to venture out to walk on the Kailash Mountain. And it is also said that those who walked up the mountain, never returned. In all these centuries, they have gone within, never to return.

About the author

Bharat Bhushan

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books, inside the internet, and deep within the mind.

Chapter 1 – Part 1: Bad weather forecast at Manasarovar

Ramesh Kulkarni was always patient with his son, Vijay. He knew that his son would never listen to any advice. After all, to his adventurous, mountaineer, rock-climbing, himalayan thrill-seeker son, Ramesh would always be the middle-class, old-city retiree who had returned from an active service in the army and settled in his ancestral house, Pune. *"It will always be Poona for me,"* thought Ramesh to himself.

"Vijay, be careful," said Ramesh, shouting hoarsely by habit into the telephone, *"DD News TV Channel says that the weather in Kashmir and Nepal is getting worse. Do you have to do your trek tomorrow? Can you not postpone it?"*

Vijay laughed into the telephone. Ramesh could hear it clearly. Vijay said, *"Relax Papa, and please do not shout into the telephone. This is not your trunk-call long distance telephone call. How many times do I have to tell you? These are modern telephones. I can hear you clearly, as though you are inside my alpine tent, here at our camp at Manasarovar."*

Ramesh smiled and spoke more slowly, *"Vijay, the news says that it is going to get bad in the entire region above the Garhwal Himalayas. And you say that I am in your plastic tent? Absolutely not. You know that your mother here does not allow me to even take my morning walk in the Deccan Gymkhana grounds if it was drizzling at night. The only way I will reach Manasarovar is if kidnapped by force by my Army Regiment and taken there by helicopters."*

Vijay enjoyed his father's plight. He knew fully well that his mother was very careful and paranoid about their health. She had always maintained that it cost less to be careful and she was not going to be found giving away the family savings to medical doctors. She had never done so, thought Vijay. His mother would always go to her cousins, who were physicians, homeopaths, ayurved doctors and included one who was a specialist in treating arthritis.

Ramesh repeated again on the phone, *"Vijay, I know you will not like to listen to your own father. If you were here, I could have scolded you, and your mother would have made you feel guilty by crying out her tears. But we are in Pune. Gita, your mother and me, and you are far away in Manasarovar, inside a cold and wet plastic tent. So take care, and keep calling us whenever you can. Wait a minute. Your mother wants to talk to you. Please talk to her."*

Gita got up slowly and came limping on her painful arthritic feet. Her hands were however faster and seemed to compensate for the slowness. She grabbed the phone from Ramesh, and spoke to Vijay in a patient voice, *"Hello. Your father is scolding you again. That means you are probably doing fine and well."* Vijay replied, *"Mama, please tell Papa not to keep saying that I am in a plastic tent up here in the Himalayas at Manasarovar. This is an alpine tent. It is designed to help me stay here without suffering in these extreme conditions."*

"Yes. Yes. I know that. But, be careful out there. The weather out there is supposed to worsen tomorrow. What do you plan to do? Are you going on the pilgrim

walk-area, the 'parikrama', and return to camp? I have heard that it takes four to five days to complete the entire walk around the Manasarovar lake" Gita said, "I hope you are cautious and sensible tomorrow. Will it be possible to talk to us from there? You do know that both your parents are old people, living alone and totally concerned about your well-being?"

Vijay felt awfully homesick at that moment, with his mother's reminder. *"Mama, do not worry. I have never been a foolish trekker. I do not go out to become a hero. My entire group wants to return back to Pune and we want to return alive and in good health. We are very careful. We are very well equipped,"* he continued, speaking in a very confiding tone, to reassure his mother, *"And, Mama, we will not go out of our tents, not plastic tents, tell Papa, alpine tents. We will not go out if the weather is bad. I promise you. Tell Papa. Tell him not to worry. You should also not worry."*

Gita Kulkarni smiled at hearing her son's assurance. She turned to Ramesh and said, *"O father-of-Vijay, your son has promised that he will not go out of his alpine tents if the weather is bad. Do not worry. He is asking you not to worry."* Talking to her son over the telephone, sounding happy and content, she said, *"Vijay, I have told your father not to worry. You do not tell me not to worry. I cannot stop worrying. But do call. I will keep the phone down now. OK?"*

Limping back to her bed, Gita felt happy but worried. She knew her son very well. She knew that her husband, Ramesh, would also continue to worry. Their son had never implemented any of his promises and had never been one to refuse an adventure or a challenge. She felt

that he would be tempted to venture out of his tent in bad weather only because his parents had asked him to be cautious. Vijay did not know what it was to be cautious. He was sensible, well planned, meticulous and a good team leader. Cautious, he was not.

She looked at Ramesh, and knew that he was wondering about the same aspects. He looked up at her, understood the unspoken message, the hidden worry and the obvious concern and nodded in agreement. He raised his hands in exasperation upwards, in prayer to God and stood up to get his medicines. On his way to the medicine box that was placed conveniently on the dining table, he turned to the prayer room and bowed low with his hands placed together in front of his forehead, and prayed, *“O Shiva, O Mahadeva, O Maheshwara, you are the nearest to Vijay right now. He is in your territory. He is in your protection. Please take care of him. We have no one else to ask help from. Only you can help Vijay and us. Om Namah Shivaayaa. Om Namah Shivaayaa. Om Namah Shivaayaa.”*

Ramesh wondered about the situation. He had heard about the weather forecast from the DD News Weather Channel on television. It was a government news channel and they would get their information directly from the meteorology departments and institutions. They were more reliable than all the other private news channels. Nobody worried about the upper Himalayas. The other ‘newsy’ channels seemed to be more intent on showing climate news about rain in New Delhi, about flooded roads in Mumbai and rising tides in Chennai. This was another aspect of modern India that irritated Ramesh totally. He could never keep up with the change of names of cities and towns. They should allow people

to use both the names, he would emphasise and keep arguing with his friends.

He stopped in front of the dining table, trying to recollect the reason he had come to collect something. He was forgetting more and more stuff nowadays. Did he come here to drink water? There was an empty water jug on the table. He would have to get some water from the tap. He did not like to drink cold water from the refrigerator. Why did he come to the dining table? He had just about eaten lunch, only an hour ago. Newspapers? They were kept neatly folded, with their crease intact, from his breakfast reading. He would take them away only after his evening cup of Tea. So why did he come to the dining table, he wondered.

Gita kept looking at him. She was getting worried. This was happening only too frequently to Ramesh. She did not want to help him out, but she feared for him. She used the next best option. She called out, *“O father-of-Vijay, can you get me my medicines and ointments? And while you are at the dining table, can you bring me some water after you have taken your medicines?”* Ramesh understood the message only too well. He knew his wife and knew that she was worried. He replied, *“This Vijay, he has made me nervous and forgetful. I will have to talk to Dr. Atul Kulkarni, our homeopath. He will know what to do about my new habit of forgetting things. I do not want to get dementia. Atul will understand. He is not from your side of the family, na? He is from the sensible side of the family. Ha Ha Ha Ha.”*

Gita pretended to look annoyed. She will have to talk to Dr. Atul Kulkarni before Ramesh went to his clinic. She could convince Atul to give some sensible medicines to

Ramesh. She would also have to get some medicines from him for her arthritic pain that seemed to suddenly shoot up from her knees. The ointments were not helping. Not helping at all.



Chapter 1 – Part 2: Watching the Kailash Peak from Dirapuk Gompa

Sometimes Norbu felt that he would be better back at home at Darchen with his parents at their small store, selling stuff to the pilgrims who came up to the pilgrim paths of this sacred mountain. Judging by the plight of his situation now, at dusk, with the dark rain-storm clouds coming up the *Kang Renpoche* mountain, Norbu wondered if he would have been much better off in continuing with taking care of the small barley farm plot at their native hamlet away from Darchen. He was not at Darchen, Norbu kept reminding himself. He was in this small canvas and tarpaulin tent, pitched in a small rocky depression, waiting out the night at Dirapuk Gompa.

He was not alone, Norbu thought to himself, and smiled. He had good company, and they were his very good friends of many years. He had known them both since their childhood and they had enormous faith in him. The fourth one in this small tent was a new friend, and yet the other two had accepted him, even if he was unlike them. For that matter, even Norbu was unlike the two yaks that snuggled against each other in this small tent. The fourth one in the tent was a Tibetan Mastiff pup, less than two years of age. In all appearances though, the Mastiff looked more dangerous than the yaks.

Norbu began to prepare for cooking dinner inside the tent. He had seen to it that the yak had grazed on the meadows below the Dirapuk Gompa after the pilgrims had gone to rest in their alpine tents. The yak were content and so was the Mastiff, having been able to get to some meat from the eateries that were in the

numerous tents near the Gompa. Norbu dug a hole into the ground inside the tent and arranged fist-sized rocks within it. The hole was about ten inches deep and was soon filled up with brushwood and twigs that he set fire to. Reaching into a dirty cloth bag, he pulled out a couple of dried-out yak dung cakes and added them to the fire.

The warmth of the fire inside the tent felt good, and the rocks lining the hole helped make it better. The yak began breathing more comfortably, thought Norbu, and patted the Mastiff away from the fire. Dinner for him was always taken away from the group of pilgrims and his own boss and master, who stayed in the alpine tents. Norbu and other yak boys like him stayed in makeshift tents and sheds through the night with their animals. It was a strange group of living beings that made sure they survived through the night. Yaks, mules, ponies, mastiffs and yak boys lived together within this small mini-village that sprung up around the Gompas, the government managed guest houses, the private tent areas and the eateries.

Norbu, like other yak boys, stayed through the night with his own animals. The two yaks that he had with him in the tent were owned by his family, and had been brought from their native hamlet from the valleys away from Darchen. His parents kept a small herd of yak at Shiquanhe, near Darchen, and his younger sisters tended to their grazing and other care. He had brought the two yaks on hire to the pilgrim guides for the entire season, to help the pilgrims do the *kora*, the pilgrimage that circled the great mountain of *Kang Renpoche*. The pilgrims from India called it the *Kailas Parbat*, while his own Tibetan villagers called it the *Tise*.

Cooking dinner each night by himself, Norbu always felt homesick. He longed for the warm food that his mother would be cooking at this time at Darchen. He knew that his mother would be thinking of her son away on the *kora* around *Kang Renpoche*, and she would wonder if by a miracle he could join the family for dinner. For Norbu, his dinner was a makeshift combination of *Tsampa*, with a bowl of hot watery tea and grilled barley flour. To this, he added some not so rancid butter from a plastic pouch and sprinkled salt with a liberal pinchful. He had kept some water to heat up on the fire, and he drank it up after gulping down the hot *Tsampa*.

He could hear the wind gathering in strength and they could smell the rain clouds that were gathering around the *Kang Renpoche*. It would be bad tonight, and what if the rains continued the entire day tomorrow? They were lucky that they could put up their tents and sheds inside this group of rocks on high ground. They would be safe from the gale and the heavy winds. He had come this on this path over the past four years, ever since his father had thought it wise that he should learn this strange new trade of the pilgrimage path. The barley crops were failing and his family had lost their ownership of the few stone silos that his grandfather had constructed to store the harvest from their village. The local government appointed village headman had handed over the ownership to a settler from Kashghar on promise of more income to the village account.

The yak boys knew the winds and the camping grounds on the *kora*. This pilgrim group was a slow moving one and it made for good income to the families that provided the yaks, ponies and mules. They usually

stayed at Dirapuk Gompa, about three kilometers away from the Dolma Pass, and at the meadows near Tarboche. Sitting in his tent, made of tarpaulin, canvas, plastic sheets and strong edge cloth, Norbu wondered at his life of the past four years. He had scavenged most of the tent material from pilgrim camps, of stuff that had been left behind and from material that the policemen at Shiquanhe confiscated or picked up from illegal visitors. He could not have afforded the tent to accommodate two yaks and a yak boy, if he had to purchase it.

From within his tent, Norbu could see the high peaks of *Kang Renpoche*, or *Kailas Parbat*, as the pilgrims called it. The winds were blowing the pale white clouds around the high peaks. The snowcap of *Kang Renpoche* was shining in this dark dark dark night at Dirapuk Gompa. He could not even see the pilgrim camp in the meadow below this rocky hideout, but the snowcap of *Kang Renpoche* was brilliant. The moon was out of its shadows and had come up in front of the peak, a not-so-thin crescent, with the clouds seeming to try to chase it away. There were waves and waves of clouds that kept throwing the moonlight back and forth on the smaller peaks.

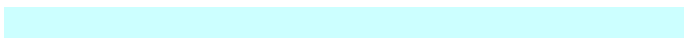
In turn, the lower peaks seemed to twist and turn like a mighty snake around *Kang Renpoche*. The drizzle seemed to have begun on the peak, and it made the snowcap look even brighter. It was raining heavily on the meadows below the Dirapuk Gompa. Norbu wondered about the day to come. Would they be able to take the pilgrims on the *kora*? If it rained here, in these high plains, it meant bad roads and a bad day on their path to the Dolma Pass and then onwards to Zutulpuk or Zuthrul Phug Gompa. They may have to stay somewhere

on the way if the pilgrims could not keep up with the speed that they would be required to maintain. It may be wiser for them to stay in the higher grounds of Dirapuk Gumpa than to risk walking through the Dolma Pass.

His parents would worry about his health on such nights, but they would not be scared for him, Norbu thought to himself. He was visiting so many *neys*, and these sacred places would not be places of danger to him and his yaks. His family knew of the Tibetan Mastiff pup that had begun to accompany him from Darchen. It had come up, skinny and starved, to his parents shop near the *neykhor* in Darchen, and Norbu had fed it from the meat waste that his mother had salted to store away. The Mastiff had fallen in love with the salty taste and seemed to have signed away his life in devotion to Norbu. He had never left him and always looked up in love, though it looked very ferocious and dangerous, even when moving about peacefully.

Norbu had wanted to become a monk, but his parents had refused him permission. The local monastery had agreed with his parents. He was here, now, at night, waiting out the rain, in a makeshift tent at Dirapuk Gumpa, with his yaks and mastiff. He wondered about the *Kang Renpoche* and the various stories that he had heard about the mountain from his parents, from the pilgrim guides, the pilgrims and the policemen of Shiquanhe. Nobody dared to climb the mountain. Nobody even dared to walk up to its foothills. The local policemen, monks and villagers kept a watch out for anyone who would try to do so. They said that nobody had ever returned.

His parents sold the *neyigs*, the guidebooks to the local sacred places. He could read some of these books and heard from others who could read properly. It spoke of the veneration that all religions had for *Kang Renpoche*. He had met pilgrims of all types. Hindus, Jains, Buddhists and Bon Pos. They came here to walk the *kora*. Some walked from Darchen to Tarboche to Dirapuk Gumpa to Dolma Pass to Zutulpuk to Darchen, while some pilgrims walked it the other way around. It was good money for the work that took up some months. His family needed it to support them through the winter when there would be no work. It was all due to the sacred peak of *Kang Renpoche*. Norbu could see the peak from within his tent, in this night, with the gathering rainstorm, and he bowed his head in prayer, asking its blessings for a safe *kora*.



Chapter 1 – Part 3: The Buddhist monk and the Sikh Pilgrim at Darchen

The lone Chinese policeman at the roadside eatery outside Darchen on this stormy night wondered about the odd couple sitting by themselves at a dining table hidden away from the wood-fire. A Buddhist monk and a Sikh sitting together certainly looked very suspicious in this heartland of western Tibet. As if the recent riots were not the end of troubled days, he wondered about what these two strange and unlikely companions were talking about. Better to make sure, he thought, and gestured for the eatery owner to come across.

It was an eatery, a store, and a safe house for pilgrims' travel and camping equipment, a parking space for rent for vehicles and also had a ramshackle shed alongside that doubled up as a stable for yaks, ponies, horses and mules. Every activity of this eatery was illegal, thought the Chinese policeman. But, every service provided by this eatery was an essential life support system in these hostile lands of Darchen, the gateway to the Lake Manasarovar and Mount Kailash, as the waves of Hindu pilgrims from India kept reminding him.

The eatery owner came up to the policeman and smiled, for he had to, and asked, "O Shenshe, would you have some more hot soup and grilled bacon? We made a new bowl just now." The policeman nodded, for the hot soup would be very welcome in this night that promised of a storm, a strong windy hailstorm possibly, tomorrow. The soup would help him get through this night. He could not go into the town of Darchen in this rain. He had brought his bicycle inside the eatery to prevent it from

being blown away. Or stolen, he smiled, by the poor Tibetan pilgrims from the neighbouring valleys.

The cycle was propped up against a steel-black hummer with Lhasa number plates. The sleek 4-wheel turbo enhanced vehicle had been brought inside the eatery to prevent it from being damaged by the hailstorm. There were two land rovers parked close to the hummer. The dining tables had been moved aside to allow for the vehicles to be brought inside for protection. The eatery owner would be paid for the service, would be paid handsomely.

The policeman nodded towards the Buddhist monk and the Sikh pilgrim sitting away from the others in the dining hall. The eatery owner understood the policeman's unspoken question and shouted out to the Buddhist monk, "O Master, do come over here, into the warmth of the wood fire. I will get you some hot soup and rice with curried potatoes. Shenshe here, our policeman friend is about to take a new bowl of soup, and he can do with some advice and guidance from you. Get your friend from India also to sit near the fire. We will get him some more food."

To his surprise, the Buddhist monk and the Sikh pilgrim came over without a word of protest and without any delay. They came over to Shenshe's dining table, if it was to be called that. The table was actually a long plank of thick wood, covered with a plastic sheet nailed to it with card paper. The plank was resting on stone blocks on either end. There were lower stone blocks on both sides of the plank to serve as chairs. For Shenshe, the eatery owner had provided some luxury. He had covered

the stone block with a pile of clothes to serve as a cushion.

To his further surprise, Shenshe realized that the Buddhist monk was a stranger. For he knew most of the monks in the region, and this Buddhist monk was certainly not from the Darchen or Shiquanhe area. His robes were also different. So he was not from any of the local monasterial orders. The Sikh seemed to be a holy type of pilgrim. This was certainly getting to be very strange, thought Shenshe. He introduced himself to the two holy men, “O Masters, welcome. I am Shenshe, and I am the police custodian of this place and the nearby settlements along this road from Darchen. You two do not seem to be from here. Are you both pilgrims then?”

The Buddhist monk bowed low in greeting and sat at the table. The Sikh holy man also bowed, with his palms together in front of his chest, and took a seat next to the monk. It was the Buddhist monk who answered, “Brother, we greet you with the spirit and friendship of our peoples. Hot food will certainly be welcome. I am Tibetan, but born in India. My grandparents had settled in the sacred land of Bodhgaya and I am a monk from the monastery at Nalanda, where the most enlightened one taught many hundred years ago. My Sikh brother with me is Sardar Amarpal Singhji, from Amritsar, from the holy temple of his people. He hopes to become a holy man of his religion in the future, but for now has come to this land in search for answers about his Master.”

That was certainly a new one, thought Shenshe. He had never heard such a story for an excuse in all his monitoring the local Buddhist monks and their activities.

He asked, “It is certainly an honour to be in the presence of two holy men, such as you. What does the Sikh pilgrim seek? And why do you accompany him? Do you also seek answers about the Sikh religion? Why does he seek your help? Why here, of all places, Darchen or the *Kang Renpoche*, the Kailash Mountain, as he would perhaps call it?”

Pilgrims, local Tibetan vendors and the eatery owner and his wife gathered around the three men, in anticipation of a good story and of allowing the stormy night to pass them by while they heard the Buddhist monk talk, for he had come from the holy land of the most enlightened one. The monk knew what was expected of him, and he gave himself up to the eager faces of everyone waiting to hear him speak. He said, “I do not know much of the religion of my companion, but what I have learnt from him over the past ten days, I cannot but compare the similarities that we seek in our lives, the messages that we are custodians to from our masters before us, and the path that we provide for one and all in our temples, monasteries and sacred places everywhere.”

“My brother from Amritsar comes here to the land of *Kang Renpoche*, as you know it, the Sumeru Mountain, as he would declare, to visit the monastery of *Guru Rinpoche*, the Precious One, the Lotus Born, he who is also known as *Padmasambhava*, a manifestation of the *Amitabha Buddha*, and was resident below the great mountain. My brother, Sardar Amarpal Singhji, is a holy man from Amritsar, or he will soon be, comes in search of the knowledge about his first Master, Guru Nanakji, who came here many hundreds of years ago. I will allow him to say of his search.”

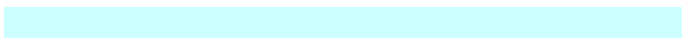
The Sikh pilgrim spoke in Hindi, and yet all those gathered here understood him, for it was the search in his eyes that helped them realize the sanctity of his words, and he said, “My brothers here, I bow to you, for you are all fortunate, to be in this most sacred of all holy lands. Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, Sikhs, Bon Pos and all Tibetans alike, this land of Kailas, this birth place of the mighty rivers. I come from Amritsar, from the holiest temple of our people, in search of knowledge of my beloved Master, Guru Nanakji. He came here in his journeys, some say he came from Ladakh, and some say he came from Sikkim. Whatever anyone would say, he did come here and stay, and taught of his way of understanding and knowledge to the people.”

“The Tibetan Buddhists have regarded my beloved Master as a saint. The Buddhist followers of that time learnt from his teachings. It is said that he was known as the *Rimpoche Nanak Guru of Punjab*, and not much is known of this part of his journeys, his third journey also known as his third *Udasi* when he stayed near the *Kang Renpoche*. It is said that there would be stone inscriptions in the monasteries and *gompas* in this area telling us of the journey of my beloved Master. I come in search of such knowledge that would help me speak of his journey here. It is possible that the inscriptions would be in Hindi or my language, the Gurmukhi, and therefore would not have been understood by the local people here.”

The Sikh pilgrim continued, “O brothers, I bow to you, again. Do let me know if you know of those who could help me or guide me. I come in search of knowledge. It is said that my beloved Master helped the local king to reconstruct some damaged monasteries. He was

honoured for his help and guidance and teachings given here. There are also those who would say that my beloved Master, Guru Nanakji, the *Rinpoche Nanak Guru of Punjab*, was the also a manifestation of *Padmasambhava* himself. There is also the mention that it is perhaps only Guru Nanakji, who actually went up the Sumeru Mountain and returned. This knowledge would perhaps be found in the monastery of *Guru Rinpoche*, on the path from Tarboche to Dirapuk Gumpa and Dolma La.”

So saying, the Sikh pilgrim sat in prayer, and began to recite, “*Ek Omkar...*”



Chapter 1 – Part 4: The “strictly vegetarian Hindu cook” at Shiquanhe

Everyone who came in search of him called him “Maharaj”. It was his actual name. His name was Hariram Maharaj. He had explained his name once. It seems that his given name was Hariram while he had been given the title ‘Maharaj’ because of his skill in making very tasty vegetarian Gujarati-Rajasthani style food of Western India. All good cooks in his land were called ‘Maharaj’, he had explained very humbly. He had also added, after a while, that the word ‘Maharaj’ meant ‘the King of Kings’, which of course, he was not.

And then the story of his life began to get more complicated. It was too much for the eatery owner at Shiquanhe to understand. He knew that India was a very large country and that the Hindu, Sikh, Jain and Buddhist pilgrims from that land were different from each other. He had also begun to understand over the many years that he had operated this tented eatery outside Shiquanhe, that Indians within the Hindus or the other religions were also very different from each other. He had himself come over from Quinhai, a town at some distance from Shiquanhe. But he knew his fellow Tibetans and the ever migrating Chinese.

Some Indians would come into his eatery in the early years, and would ask for vegetarian food, which he had not known would be an exclusive demand. He began to cook vegetarian food for them. And then other Indians came who demanded that the vegetarian food had to be cooked in separate utensils from the ones where he cooked meat or fish. His wife was from Yushu, and she

understood this demand from the monastery near her village. The monks at the monastery were very strict vegetarians and they had demanded that the eateries nearby served vegetarian food cooked from separate utensils. She had convinced him to separate the utensils. It would mean more customers, and these strict vegetarians usually paid much better. Her advice had been correct and he had profited from the separation of utensils.

Later, came the demand from larger pilgrim groups and tour companies from Kathmandu that they would bring clientele on an exclusive basis if he were to employ a Indian cook who knew there demands and tastes and understood the need to employ strict vigilance on bringing forth the ‘strictly vegetarian Hindu’ food. He had understood their need and he did not argue for the pay was good and prompt. There were no credit dealings here and the requirements were growing to such an extent that it would be adequately profitable to accept and adapt. After having employed more than ten different cooks from India, of all types, including ones from Nepal and Bhutan, who claimed they knew ‘strictly vegetarian Hindu’ food, he had discovered the Maharaj.

It was the other way around, for it was the Maharaj who had come in search of Luo Tsering of Quinhai, the owner of the tented eatery that had a very gaudy painted signboard that read “Strictly Vegetarian Hindu Food (cooked separately)”. He had introduced himself in the pidgin Tibetan+Chinese+Hindi+English that he had picked up in his stay in the various cities in Ngari. He wanted to stay on in Shiquanhe, he had explained, and he wanted work. He could cook the ‘strictly vegetarian Hindu food’, he said, and moreover his name was the

best certificate that he could proclaim to all Hindu pilgrims to the Kailash Mountain and the Lake Manasarovar.

Luo Tsering and his wife had planned on running a simple tented eatery out on the pilgrim path from Shiquanhe to Darchen and they had started with the simple local Chiang cuisine, and restricted themselves only to culinary delights at dinner such as cow hoofs or cheese. They had added on Sichuan and Xinjiang cuisine depending upon the season and the movement of Chinese troops and policemen or pilgrims from other parts of Tibet. They had done well but the income was largely being spent on surviving in this harsh climate on the snowy deserts of the Tibetan Himalayas. The pilgrims from India had changed their income and profit margins and the eatery had grown into a parking area and tenting ground.

The demand for very exclusive vegetarian food had surprised him, and he had imagined it to be that of a very small group of pilgrims. What he had not realized was that most pilgrims visiting Kailash Mountain would not even dare to accidentally pollute themselves or their pilgrimage by the proximity of non-vegetarian food. Hariram Maharaj had helped them out enormously, Luo thought, for he had taken over the entire section of cooking, managing and hosting the Hindu pilgrims from India. Maharaj had also searched for and trained three helpers, leftover pilgrims from Nepal and India, to work in the vegetarian section.

Sometimes they would sit to relax, in-between pilgrim groups, and they would chat. It was usually never a discussion, for it was Hariram Maharaj who would talk

without a stop. Luo found it very difficult to understand whatever Maharaj would explain about himself. There was very little else that Maharaj would talk about. It was either about him, or nothing. Maharaj explained stuff in a very specific sense of geography, culture, religion and the diversity of India, all of which never seemed to make any sense to Luo. He listened quietly, because it seemed to be useful to pick up some of the phrases and words, and in understanding and respecting the diversity of these strange pilgrims from the lands below the Himalayas.

Maharaj explained that his name meant ‘King of Kings’, but he was not one. He cooked Gujarati-Rajasthani food of Western India, but he was not a Gujarati or a Rajasthani. He had worked in a Gujarati household of a very rich businessman, where he had cooked for more than forty members of a very large family that lived in a single house. They had begun to call him ‘Maharaj’, and he had become known to the neighbourhood by that name. His Master, Seth Walchandbhai Shah, had been a devotee of a holy man from Rajasthan, who had his ashram in some place near a big river called the Narmada. This river did not flow in Rajasthan, but the holy man had established his ‘gompa’, as the Maharaj had described it to Luo, to help him understand. Upon a request from the holy man, his Master had asked him to work at the ashram and cook Rajasthani food. The Seth had continued to pay for his salary, and the title ‘Maharaj’ had followed him there.

Pilgrims would regularly visit the ashram to do the *kora*, the pilgrimage on foot around the entire length of the Narmada River. They would stay overnight at the ashram, and tell stories about the world outside the

kitchen. Maharaj had however begun to attend the sermons and lectures of the holy man and had begun to practice yoga, especially the Hatha Yoga that was taught here. It was taught to a select few, and it was a rare practise, Maharaj explained to Luo. It was about the breath, and about breathing or how not to breathe – Luo was getting confused here and found it all very vague and difficult to keep up – and about meditation and concentration and about inner consciousness and postures and something called *asanas*, as Maharaj kept explaining.

A group of Hindu monks, or sadhus, from the ashram decided to do the *kora* around the Narmada River, and Maharaj had sought permission of the holy man to accompany them. He had finally found his calling, he said, for the freedom in walking out along holy shrines and sacred places, with fellow pilgrims, was utter and total bliss. The pilgrimage on foot around the Narmada River had taken several long days, or a couple of months – Luo forgot this detail – and Maharaj realized that he could no longer stay back in the kitchen in the ashram. One of the ashram monks on the Narmada *parikrama* or *kora* had explained to Maharaj about the Kailash mountain and the abode of Siva, the eternal.

The ashram sadhu had explained that the Kailash *parikrama* was the ultimate expression of devotion, and the closest that one could get to reach Siva. It was the most difficult and the toughest. The sadhu was totally certain that Maharaj could never even dream of reaching Kailash or doing the *parikrama*. He had predicted that it was in Maharaj's fate-lines on his palm that he would not amount to anything and he would not achieve any

form of greatness. This outright rejection had spurred him, and he had complained about it to the holy man.

The holy man had been compassionate and understanding. He had told Maharaj that the Kailash *parikrama* was not the ultimate test. The final challenge was in completing 108 *koras* around the Kailash Mountain, or walking 108 times around the sacred peak. If one would achieve this, and if one would practice the strict adherence to meditation and concentration through Hatha Yoga, then one could get admittance to the very secret sect of Nath Yogis within the hidden hill slopes of the Kailash Mountain. He had understood his calling, and he had arrived at Shiquanhe to wait for his time. Each year he completed about five *koras*, but he would do more the next year, he said.



Chapter 1 – Part 5: The great old Qinhai nomad horseman at Dirapuk

“Drolma La” shouted his grandfather, upon sighting the Pass and pointed out to his grandson. It happened each time, thought the young man, smiling at the excitement of his grandfather. They were returning from Darchen and the clouds were gathering over the mountain pass below the *Kang Renpoche* Mountain. Yeshe was worried about the coming rains. It was unusual for the clouds to gather in such strength in this time of the year. What would happen to the *kora*? What would the pilgrims walking the *kora* do about sheltering or waiting out the rain? Most importantly, what would his parents do at Dirapuk with the shop and camping site that they set up each year?

Yeshe was returning with his grandfather, Sangye, who was also known as the “Great Old Qinhai Nomad Horseman”. Seated on their trusted mules, they were leading four yaks, loaded with trading goods, eatables, medicine boxes, matches and salt (most important), and boxes filled with religious memorabilia that pilgrims would purchase from them to keepsakes of their *kora* around the *Kang Renpoche*. Bzanba and Kangryi, Tibetan Mastiff dogs, who knew their job on these rocky paths around the great mountain, were herding the yaks. They had done these tasks efficiently over the past many years that the family of Sangye came to Dirapuk.

The old man looked at the dogs with affection. He had known their parents and their grandparents and their great grandparents and their great great grandparents. After all, was he not known in all of Qinhai and Nagre

provinces as the sacred custodian of the *Tsang Khyi* breed of the Tibetan Mastiff? Both, Bzanba and Kangryi, were of the true gene line of the *Tsang Khyi*, through they were not of the provinces of Qinhai and the Darchen-Shiquanhe areas. The *Tsang Khyi* breed was known from the Cuomai, Jiazha Sanru, Cuona and the Longzi areas. European fanciers of the Mastiffs, and the rare Russian, usually ended up staying for a couple more days in their camping rent-sites at Dirapuk, wanting to learn from the old man about the Mastiffs and hoping to strike a bargain to see if he would commit to selling their pups.

To Yeshe and his parents, Bzanba, Kangryi and the other two *Tsang Khyi* Mastiffs were very loyal guard-dogs and helpers with the yaks, mules, ponies and the Qinhai horses that they brought with them all the way from Tsaparang, near Zanda. Each year, Sangye traveled with his family to the *Kang Renpoche*, to establish his trading station, camping site and shop at Dirapuk. It took them a number of days and several halts to reach the *kora* trail stops. They usually established their small settlement away from the trail, higher up, amongst the rocks and walls of the hills at Dirapuk. Their shop was almost at the level of the Drolma La Pass, and on clear nights on this sprawling flat wilderness, the lights could be seen as a welcome sign to the pilgrims walking rapidly down the path in the late evenings.

Over the years, the locals at Dirapuk had made space for the great old man and had begun to recognize his arrival as a good omen for the trade of the area. Sangye commanded tremendous respect in the region though he was only a nomad horseman and it was in his trade to breed, nurture and sell horses in Tibet. He never sold the

Tibetan Mastiffs to foreigners, for it was against his religious beliefs to allow the breed to go out of Tibet. The Mastiff had come to Tibet with the Living Buddhas. They were worshipped with the Living Buddhas in some monasteries. Yeshe suspected that the old man had a secret network through which he distributed the pups to trusted custodians and breed-protectors whenever a new litter arrived.

They made good time riding on the mules rather than walking. The yaks preferred to walk without being chased by their owners. They seemed to pretend to be watchful of the Mastiffs, but Yeshe knew that they were all good friends. He was happy to see the groups of pilgrims resting near the shop run by his parents. They were of all sorts here, who knew the wisdom of seeking high ground away from the pilgrim trail at Dirapuk. The slow moving hill streams and the innocent looking marsh grounds could turn dangerous after a stormy night. There were poor Tibetan pilgrims from all over the region, in groups with their sign-flags held high to let their members know of their common resting place for the night. In contrast, there were the rich Scandinavian trekkers and mountaineers who had set up their tents in the enclosures given to them.

There were Hindu and Buddhist pilgrims from India, gathering inside large tents set up by their tour companies. These tents were set up at the beginning of the season, and the companies kept bringing in new groups of pilgrims, sometimes two groups in a week, and sometimes three, if the weather held well. They had their own style of cooking and they brought their cooks and helpers. The Europeans brought their noodles, beans, meat, fish and water and used the utensils and

allowed Yeshe's mother to cook for them. The Tibetan pilgrims brought bags of their foodstuffs and used makeshift cooking areas in the camping site to cook their food.

Yeshe began to unload the stuff from the yaks with help from the Darchen boys that his father had hired upon arrival. They rushed in and out of the main storage shed that they had made against the rock wall behind their cooking tent. Freed from their goods, the yaks were led away by the old man to the holding stockade and stable for the night. It was best to prevent them from moving about to graze on this very strange night, thought the old man. He moved the eating and water pans of the Mastiffs to the deeper walls of the stable to help localize them for the night with the yaks, mules, ponies and horses.

On arrival from Tsaparang, Yeshe's parents had gone in to Darchen and hired the helper boys and about ten women from the village-settlement. All ten women were elderly in age and some were widows, while the others seemed to have been from very poor families. These boys and women came to live with Yeshe's parents and the great old man at their camping settlement at Dirapuk. The women helped clean up the tenting areas, pick up all the garbage, rake the soil, feed the yaks and mules and would help in odd jobs with the pilgrim groups. Each woman would take up a group of pilgrims by turn as they would come, whether poor ones or rich trekkers.

Yeshe's parents had also taken help from some masons in Darchen, some years ago, to help construct some low bunker-like flat roof stone houses that were more like abutments to rocky areas on these mountain slopes.

These stone houses helped to house the foodstuff and other provisions that they packed in to last the entire tourist season. Over the past three years, Yeshe's mother had begun to keep ducks in one of the stone houses to collect the eggs and sell them. As they traveled back and forth from Tsaparang, they purchased about twenty ducks at Shiquanhe or Darchen, depending upon availability and price. The ducks were packed in wicker baskets and loaded on to the yaks and brought to Dirapuk.

One of the older women helpers brought hot soup and buttered wheat bread to Yeshe. She sat nearby talking to four pilgrim women while Yeshe took a quick break from his work in helping the camping site settle down for the stormy night. He could guess about their conversation. They were not talking about the *Kang Renpoche* Mountain. They were discussing about village girls from their neighbourhoods who could be married off to Yeshe and how to go about getting the permission from the great old man. The older woman helper smiled in the discussion and rushed back to Yeshe to take away the bowl and plates and nudged him knowingly, as though the marriage was already done and over with.

This discussion happened each night and he knew the manner in which he had to respect the affection of the Tibetan pilgrims. He knew it would not happen so easily for these pilgrims were from all over Tibet and each region was entirely different from each other. Yeshe and his family were nomadic horsemen from the Qinhai plains and knew of no other life than moving about in their yak-hair tents. It was only at Dirapuk that they established an elaborate settlement. Back at Tsaparang, they would stay in their yak-hair tents, while this entire

settlement, stables, sheds and other equipment would be packed up and left in the custody of one of the woman helper's family at Darchen. Yeshe's parents paid the woman with good money and she would not be tempted to break their trust. For now, the stormy night that was approaching fast was uppermost in all their thoughts and worries. Yeshe took a good look around the camping site, at the stables and at the tented eatery and shop. Bzanba, the large Tibetan Mastiff, was also looking around, apparently not trusting Yeshe to do his job properly. The dawn would disclose what the night would bring.

